BEST SELLERS

A BIWEEKLY REVIEW SERVICE

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Ellen Glasgow. In This Our Life. Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1941. 467 p. $2.50

Ellen Glasgow is one of our more significant novelists. Last year the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded her the Howells Medal for eminence in the novel. From Richmond, Virginia, she has been one of the first writers to "break away from the false sentiment and romanticism of the traditional novel of the South." Like some seventeen of her previous novels, In This Our Life is in the same vein.

The setting is a Virginia tidewater city. The Timberlake family--queerly named Asa the father, Lavinia the wife, and daughters Roy and Stanley--is struggling to maintain an aristocratic gentility it can't afford on Asa's fifty dollars a week from the tobacco factory his father lost to the new-type industrialists, represented by the wealthy self-made, bossy but not helpful, Uncle William, the wife's father.

At the beginning Asa sees his favorite daughter Roy married to a promising young doctor, Peter and his wife's favorite, Stanley, about to marry a promising young lawyer, Craig. He himself has for years, from a sense of family feeling and duty, nursed his invalided, unloved and unloving wife but secretely hopes to be released some day to spend his last days with Kate, the widow of his best friend, on her farm.

Then everything goes wrong. Stanley elopes with Roy's husband, claiming the new freedom and the right to love regardless of family or honor. This action is represented as ruining four lives, theirs, and of course Roy's and also Craig's. Roy bears up bravely, but Craig goes to pieces. After a year they meet and slowly fall in love. Roy divorces Peter, who then marries Stanley, and considers someday marrying Craig. Her being a divorcee is not mentioned as an

XUM

obstacle one way or another. We are made to sympathize with their plans.

However, the novel is saved for Catholics when, after we learn that Stanley and Peter are very unhappy, news comes that Peter has committed suicide. Stanley then comes home, depressed but as selfish and spoiled as ever. In one of her wild drives she kills a mother and her child, and to save herself implicates the fine negro chauffeur, Parry. The police jail him, and her mother and uncle and practically everybody believes or pretends to believe her story, except the father. His sense of justice prevails. Craig, once deserted by her and now engaged to Roy, should help the father and the negro boy, but upon her appeal he again sides with her. The father, however, gets the negro boy freed, whose career is nevertheless represented as ruined. And rich Uncle William has influence to get Stanley exonerated. But Roy realizes that Craig is still infatuated with Stanley and is no more reliable than Peter was. This seems to break her. She runs away. But after one night she comes back for her clothes, and the father, giving up his chance of divorce from his wife, and happiness with Kate, nurses her and, we feel, will help her remain good and will now deny himself the new freedom and let duty and family feeling prevail and so be finally more happy than those who let a wrong love smash duty and honor.

The central impression of the book is that in the end duty and fidelity to husband or wife are better and happier than destroying everything for any new love. Divorce, while accepted, is regarded as unfortunate. The attitude of "keeping negroes in their place" is condemned and equal education for them is suggested. Excessive wealth is deprecated. There is not a single word offensive to any child. The book can be recommended to everybody, though probably only the more intelligent of readers, high school age and up, will enjoy it.

Frank Hough. Neutral Ground. Lippincott. April 30, 1941. 526.p. $2.75

In Neutral Ground Frank Hough has written a novel of the American revolution that is positively "Wiswellian" in type though not nearly so good as Kenneth Robert's book of a year ago and much more of an adventure story.

Neutral Ground is a story of Westchester County just above New York City, a region alternately held and abandoned by British and Americans and a base of operations for the non-military partisans and raiding parties of both sides. The story is told by tracing the fortunes of two young men, one Sam Hilton, easy going, liberal, prosperous gentleman-farmer who leaves his wife and his land to fight with the British in Rogers Rangers and the other Rob Trowbridge, rakehell and wastrel, who chooses the American cause and in so doing succeeds in making somewhat of a man of himself. In following Sam Hilton's career the story shows the organization of Loyalist regiments and with Trowbridge, though he is primarily an officer of the Continental line, we see the operations of the Guides who engage in scouting and raiding work throughout Westchester County.

XUM

Hough's story covers much of the same ground as "Oliver Wiswell" but differs from the latter in confining himself to Westchester County. Thus in parallel with Robert's book we see the early revolutionists treated as rascals, distrust between colonies, Washington treated as an austere and aloof character, the ineptitude of the Continental Congress, the fumbling manoeuvers of British generals, the shabby treatment of loyalists by the British army, the loyalist colonization project in Nova Scotia and many other features of the same sort. It seems to this reviewer that Neutral Ground is another "Oliver Wiswell" except that the story is confined to one region and is told in more detail.

From a certain standpoint the book is good. It portrays admirably the honors of "civil" war and it states quite clearly the position of the American loyalists who were as sincere, in many cases, as the most ardent patriots. The story is weakened considerably, however, by the overuse of profanity and vulgar language and by the sexual escapades of Rob Trowbridge which tend to detract from the strength of that particular character. The book can only be recommended for mature readers who will grasp the historical, social and political implications of the story.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh. The Wave of the Future. A Confession of Faith. Harcourt, Brace and Company, October, 1940. 41 p. $1.00

The Wave of the Future modestly suggests that in the clash between the totalitarians and the democracies the evil is not all on one side and the good on the other. It grants and deplores the "sins" of aggression and persecution of the totalitarian states but suggests that there are other sins, such as selfishness, smugness, and resistance to change, of "which we 'Democracies,' all of us, are guilty." (p.11)

What is pushing behind Communism, Fascism, and Naziism, Mrs. Lindbergh asks. Are we sure it is a return to barbarism? Or could it be "some new, and perhaps even ultimately good, conception of humanity trying to come to birth, often through evil and horrible forms and abortive attempts?" (p.16) Do they not perhaps represent another French Revolution, in which Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality rode along with the bloody guillotine?

That totalitarianism represents an effort, sincere if not necessarily the best, for a more socially just world is Mrs. Lindbergh's suggestion.

She urges that a military crusade against it is not in order. Rather every effort should be made to understand it, perhaps to learn from it. At any rate we who are still at peace should rather reform here, meet in our own and better way humanity's cry for a juster order, with less unemployment and fewer slums. If we do that we have nothing to fear from this totalitarian revolution whose ideas are much more dangerous than its tanks. It is a modest plea but beautifully written for understanding, social reform, and peace.

Everybody should read it while there is yet time and hope. It breathes the spirit of Christianity. It is in many ways the only completely sound plea for staying out of this war that has so far

XUM

been made.

Sara Atherton. Mark's Own. Bobbs Merrill Co. Feb. 14, 1941. 491 p. $2.75

This is a story of local history by a woman who is a native of the locale and who apparently has immersed herself in the factual material of her subject. This material is the rise of the anthracite industry with its sociological consequences. The fiction is the history of a family for three generations. The locale is the Wyoming Valley of the Susquehanna River in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The Ariadne thread is furnished by a family through three generations. Into the Wyoming Valley in the middle of the last century came Mark Stone who married a descendant of the old settlers in the Valley. He drilled the first anthracite shaft mine and, despite disappointment and tragedy, made a success of the venture. The mine then passed to his son and to his son's daughter who in this century turned it over to the miners to operate as a cooperative. But competition with monopoly was too powerful for the miners and the attempt failed.

Not less important than the plot itself is the background. Here we see the waves of immigration moving into the valley. These new people were of many countries and many languages, and they gave to the population its heterogeneity and its multilinguality. Many of them came because they were lured by the grandiose word pictures of ruthless profiteering agents. Uprooted from their soil and traditions, they were forced to work in the black depths of the mines, and were killed off like insects in explosions and cave-ins. They were paid miserable wages. Many of them lived primitively in small company houses built by the mine owners. They were illiterate and unorganized; divided in religion, in race, in language, and in tradition.

But eventually leaders arose among them; strong men who could endure persecution and deprivation for their cause. Out of their leadership came the mine unions, organized strikes, forceful picketing, starvation, brutality, and hatred. But out of their efforts also came better wages and better living conditions for the miners.

Throughout the book runs one of the conflicts so prominent in the development of modern capitalism, that between independent operators with a social consciousness, and absentee owners whose only concern was the return on an investment.

Miss Atherton has maintained a commendable sanity in the midst of the strong forces and the deep biases, with which such material is pregnant. There is implied denunciation of ruthless profiteering mine owners, but this is as it should be. On the other hand there is sympathetic treatment of the farsighted operators who suffered as well as the others from strikes. So much of our recent fiction with sociological background has falsified the picture by an oversimplification of the forces at play that this phase of Miss Atherton's work deserves favorable comment.

Nevertheless there are profound weaknesses in Mark's Own. As history it fails because it is by intention fiction. As fiction the size of the scene it attempts to delineate makes for confusion and

XUM

weakness in character portrayal. There are so many people in the book that only a few are distinctly limned.

There can hardly be objections to the book on moral grounds. As in life there is some sin. There is no advocation of immorality, either explicitly or implicitly. From a literary standpoint the book remains a good second rate novel of local history with sociological implications that are more important than the story itself. As such it will probably not appeal to children or immature adults. With these qualifications we recommend the book.

Henry Kyd Douglas. I Rode with Stonewall. University of North Carolina. Nov. 5, 1940. 401 p. $3.00

The war memoirs of Henry Kyd Douglas are published in book form under the title I Rode with Stonewall. The Douglas recollections consist of his war diary, letters and papers written between 1862 and 1866.

Douglas fought under the command of the immortal Thomas Jonathan Jackson, known in history as 'Stonewall'. In a collection of his observations Douglas gives to the student of the period a monumental addition to the already voluminous literature of the war between the states . An intimate picture is given of life in a Confederate army camp, of anecdotes connected with famous military leaders and finally of life in a northern prison camp.

Stonwall Jackson emerges as the author's hero. Douglas adored Jackson as well as the chivalrous knight of the Confederacy Jeb Stuart.

He writes with love and appreciation and the book is a credit to his type and generation. I heartily recommend this book to the serious student of American history.

Angela Thirkell. Cheerfulness Breaks In. Knopf. Feb. 24, 1941. 342 p. $2.50

Cheerfulness Breaks In is a war story that succeeds in almost completely ignoring the war in its preoccupation with the more ordinary things of life. The scene is presentday rural England and, although centered about the activities of an English public school, is in reality concerned with the county society of the neighborhood.

Without any definite organization the author goes "Thirkelling" through a year in the lives of her characters and ends the book only when all of them are happily, albeit somewhat unromantically, married. In all, four marriages are consummated with two or three others mentioned incidentally all going to prove that even in the midst of war and history life must go on.

The war itself is scarcely mentioned except obliquely as it affects the characters.. Billeting, feeding and sewing for evacuee children, helping alien refugees, hospital and A.R.P. work, gardening projects, etc., completely change the ordinary activities of life but all

play some part in the story. Perhaps the most important is Lydia who works tirelessly at helping others yet never considers that she does more than her simple duty. The Thirkell style makes for easy and continued reading without jading the senses by brutality or anaesthetizing them by sentimentality. She is quite facile in handling her characters and her humor is always refreshing.

The book is recommended for light and interesting reading. There is only one doubtful passage in which Mme. Brownescu, a refugee, describes the treatment of a countrywoman by invading soldiers, but since this incident is handled in French and is very short it does not seem to affect the value of the book. It can also be recommended for readers on the high school level although it is doubtful that many of them will be interested.

Edgar Snow. The Battle For Asia. Random House. 1941. 431p. $3.75

Edgar Snow in his book The Battle For Asia presents a readable account of the Far-Eastern situation. Apparently Mr. Snow has not written his book for the student of history because he occasionally leaves unexplained certain historical statements.

The book like John Gunther's Inside Asia lacks explanations of some statistical information. Mr. Snow has presented a picture of war-torn China. He depicts the social and economic upheavals confronting a nation involved in war and has a lesson for the United States. "The United States has piously been denouncing Japan as a bandit while continuing to arm the bandit for over two years.

Fortunately the embargo on scrap iron and other commodities have lessened this practice. The book as a whole is long and at times tedious in so far as certain names and events are left unexplained. The general reader though will like this work for it has many elements of interest.

Recommended for all readers and students of international affairs.

Gunnar Gunnarsson. The Good Shepherd. Bobbs Merrill, 1941. 84p. $1.50

Benedikt was twice twenty-seven this year and it was exactly twenty-seven years ago he made his first Advent journey to the mountains to rescue the Grimdal sheep missed in the yearly ingathering. So it was a year of Jubilee to the Icelander as he started out again, despite the threatening weather--so menacing it was that Benedikt would be responsible for no one but "Gnarly, Leo, and myself." Gnarly--that was his wether, and Leo was his dog, all together they were the trinity and Benedikt the good shepherd who "giveth his life for the sheep".

That pretty well makes up the book--the journey to the mountains, the storm, finding the sheep, the delayed but safe return--that and the beauty of the thing, the form giving this to what would otherwise be inadequate material.

It belongs with other works (works like Hemingway's Big Two Hearted River, Cather's Lucy Gayheart, Barrie's Margaret Ogilvy, Undset's Images In A Mirror) not having much action value, not overly popular with the ordinary run of "best seller" fans--but works pensive, fine, worthwhile in their own right, not because of elaborate plots and thick pages. Gunnar Gunnarsson's work is highly recommended for all.

John Jennings. Call The New World. Macmillan. March 25, 1941. 459 p. $2.75

Now that South America has come to the fore in our economic and political relations we must expect our novelists to follow the trend. Call The New World narrates the experiences of Peter Brooke, who after being cashiered from the American Army of 1812, continues his career as a soldier in South America, serving first under Bolivar during the Venezuelan campaign and later under General San Martin, liberator of Chile and Peru, who magnanimously resigned in favor of Bolivar. Because of the range of countries (the United States, most of South America, and England) covered within the period 1814-1824, the action is diffused and hardly reaches a climax, even with the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine. The novel's chief merit is in providing some knowledge of South America during its struggle for liberation from Spanish rule.

Because of the long continued episode of Peter's adulterous life with Panchita we can hardly recommend it for high school students without qualification although both Peter and Panchita are punished through the latter's death in an earthquake. There is a curious assumption that the Church would have granted Peter a divorce had he been born a member of the church and able to prove the unfaithfulness of his first wife who was still living. (p.297).

Eric Knight. This Above All. Harper & Brothers. 1941. 473p. $2.50

In this war novel an English girl meets a soldier, spends her leave with him at a seaside hotel, quarrels with him when he decides to desert, meets him again when he proposes to her and learns of her pregnancy and sees him die in a hospital before the marriage can take place. It represents one month in England sometime after Dunkirk.

Prudence Cathaway, a well-brought up doctor's daughter, is a "Waff" girl in the British war service. In a blackout she makes a date with a stranger and shrinking from intercourse, apologizes for being different from the other Waffs. He is represented as a Galahad for not insisting. On the second date, however, with the help of alcohol she submits to what she calls "casual seduction". A few days later they see each other's face for the first time and are pleased. They plan to spend their leave together at a seaside hotel, registered as man and wife.

Here she learns from his friend Monty (a well drawn and interesting character) about the retreat at Dunkirk. She learns that her man Clive is a private, but talented and well informed, a Dunkirk hero who doesn't want to talk about it. During their stay a bombing

takes place which brings the war home to her.

A crisis occurs when he tells her that he won't fight any more and is deserting. From now on the book in its last third becomes worthwhile. He says, "And what have we to fight for in your England? Why should we preserve the rose we've never been allowed to smell?" It is a masterful presentation of all the wrongs of England especially towards her poorer classes. He insists that "good wars aren't always victorius ones" (p.322) and calls for a negotiated peace. She counters with the glories of England. When she fails to persuade him to rejoin, they separate tenderly but with no provision for meeting again.

He, for a while, is a fugitive but finally, largely thinking of her, decides to rejoin if possible. Suddenly he feels he loves her, and for the first time says he loves her and proposes. She accepts, and he learns that there will be a baby. Appointing a meeting place to marry, they miss because of an air raid. In despair she tells her father of her haystack experience and he is sympathetic. They find Clive in a hospital where he dies after an operation. She realizes that his child will be a "bastard" just as he had been. But she hopes that it will have a better England to live in than he had.

The first half of the book is casual and ugly sex. Love isn't mentioned until page 393. To me Grapes of wrath seemed a lily of decency compared to this. All the British girls in uniform are spoken of as nice girls and as submitting to "casual seduction", not the second or third date, but the first.

Finally, however, one is made to feel that such casual seduction can't be casual. Here it leads to love and intended marriage. Only they and the reader are never made to feel sorry that they began with intercourse first, instead of with love and marriage. All the people who abet their immorality are made likeable, but the hotel manager who refuses them a room is called an ugly grimy little man. The Aunt who "tells on them" and who dislikes a grandfather who has a "kept woman" is made to seem small and narrowminded. In the words of Clive the Churches are blamed for making "sex itself a sin." Profane and vulgar words abound. In my opinion the Dunkirk description is not valuable. But I do think Clive's discussion of why men fight or refuse to fight in chapter XXVIII is very valuable for a better appraisal of this war. Incidentally a startling sentence is this, "the sole core of our foreign policy in the last twenty years has been motivated only by a blind unreasoning fear that British labor might come up from the stink of the dole and revolt." (p.293)

Only speakers, writers on the war, and parents who have children of courting age and persons entrusted with the moral welfare of young people should be allowed or encouraged to read this book. High school and college students should not. At best it takes all the romance and beauty out of life, at worst it will make them think well of themselves if they don't demand the worst on the very first date. Nor does the book have any stylistic value, such as Grapes of wrath had. It is merely a timely, topical book made interesting by a realistic sex affair.

XUM

INDEX TO REVIEWS OF BEST SELLERS

Adamic — From Many Lands. Recommended. Cf. Sign, 20:313-14 D'40

Asch — What I Believe? Not Recommended. To be reviewed in next issue.

Atherton — Mark's Own. Recommended with reservation. Best Sellers, May 1

Bell — Swamp Water. Recommended. Best Sellers, April 3.

Bemelmans — The Donkey Inside. Recommended. Cf. Commonweal, 33:429 F 14, '41.

Blunt — Bet It's a Boy. Recommended for Adults.

Buchan — Mountain Meadow. Recommended. Catholic book club selection. Cf. America 64:723-24 Ap. 5 '41; Catholic Library World, 12:193, Mar. '41; Commonweal, 34:40 My. 2 '41.

Cather — Sapphire and the Slavegirl. Recommended. Cf. America 64:273 D 14 '40; Catholic World 152:634 F '41; Commonweal 33:306-7 Jan.10 '41; Sign 20:443 F '41

Churchill — Blood, Sweat and Tears. To be reviewed in next issue

Cobb — Exit Laughing. Recommended. Best Sellers, Apr. 17

Dodd — Ambassador Dodd's Diary. Recommended. America 64: 638 Mr. 15 '41; Commonweal 33:547 Mr. 21, '41

Du Maurier — Come Wind, Come Weather. Recommended. Best Sellers, April 17.

Farson — Behind God's Back. Recommended. Cf. America 64:605 Mr. 22 '41; Commonweal 33:428 F 14, '41. Commonweal 33:428 F 14, '41.

Fedorova — The Family. Recommended. Cf. America, 64:21 Oct. 12, 1940; Catholic World, 152:505, Jan. '41; Sign, 20:248 N '40; Book Survey, Dec. '40.

Fisher — City of Illusion. Recommended with reservations. Best Sellers, Apr. 17.

Gallico — Snow Goose. To be reviewed in next issue.

Glasgow — In This Our Life. Recommended. Best Sellers May 1.

Goodrich — Delilah. Recommended with reservations. Best Sellers April, 17.

Gunnarson — Good Shepherd. Recommended. Best Sellers, May 1.

Hemingway — For Whom the Bell Tolls. Not Recommended. Cf. America, 64:189-90 Nov. 23, '40; Catholic World, 152:502-13 Jan. '41; Commonweal, 33:210 D 13 '40; Sign, 20:289 D '40.

Hilton — Random Harvest. Recommended. America, 65:23 Ap. 12 '41; Catholic World, 152:760 Mr. '41; Commonweal, 33:476 F 28 '41; Sign 20:510 Mr. '41.

Hindus — To Sing with the Angels. Recommended with reservations. Cf. Catholic World 153:121 Ap. '41 Commonweal, 33:449 Mr. 7, '41.

Homes-Pollock — Letters. Recommended. Commonweal 33:625 Ap 11 '41.

Hough — Neutral Ground. Recommended for Adults. Best Sellers, May 1.

Jennings — Call the New World. Recommended with reservations. Best Sellers, May 1.

Kaup — Not for the Meek. Not Recommended. Best Sellers, April 17.

Knight — This Above All. Not Recommended. Best Sellers, May 1.

XUM

Kraus	Winston Churchill. Not Recommended. (for style) Cf. Commonweal 23:261 D27 '40.
McCullers	Reflections in a golden Eye. Not Recommended. Best Sellers, Apr. 17
Marquand	H.M. Pulham, Esq. Recommended. Cf. Catholic Library World, Mar. 1941.
Marshall	Benjamin Blake. Not Recommended. Best Sellers, Apr. 3
Maugham	Up at the Villa. To be reviewed in next issue.
Miller	White Cliffs. Recommended. Cf. The Catholic World. 152:509 Ja. '41
Poncins	Kabloona, Recommended. Best Sellers. Apr. 3
Reader's Digest Books.	Recommended. Best Sellers. Apr. 17.
Remarque	Flotsam. To be reviewed in next issue.
Reynold's	The Wounded Don't Cry. Recommended for content, not style. Cf. America 64:499 F 8 '41;Commonweal 33:452 F 21, '41
Roberts	Oliver Wiswell. Recommended. Cf. America, 64:245-46 D 7 '40; Catholic World 152:523-30 F '41; Commonweal 33:260-61 D 27 '40; Sign 20:377 Jan. '41
Roosevelt	Reader's Digest Reader. To be reviewed in next issue.
Rorick	Mr. and Mrs. Cugat. Not Recommended. Best Sellers Apr. 3.
Sadleir	Fanny by Gaslight. Not Recommended. Best Sellers Apr. 17
Sinclair	Between Two Worlds. Not Recommended. To be reviewed in next issue.
Smith	Plague on Us. Recommended. Best Sellers. Apr. 3
Snow	Battle for Asia. Recommended. Best Sellers, May 1.
Spence	One Foot in Heaven. Recommended for Adults. Cf. America 64-416 Jan 18 '41.
Struther	Mrs. Miniver. Recommended. Catholic World 152:122; Sign 20:253-54 Nov. 40
Tarkington	Heritage of Hatcher Ide. Recommended. America 64:693 Mr. 29 '41; Catholic World 153:253 My '41.
Valtin	Out of the Night. Recommended.for adults. Best Sellers, Apr. 3.
Vander Heide	My Sister and I. Recommended. Cf. Commonweal, 33:405 F 7, '41; Sign, 20:509. Mr. '41
Whipple	Giant Joshua. Recommended.for adults. Best Sellers April 17
Wilson	Crusader in Crinoline. Recommended. America 65: 105-6 May 3 '41.

XUM